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Why Women Should Be Preaching in the Churches of Christ

ROBERT M. RANDOLPH

This past Sunday, a woman led the main prayer for the morning worship service, and another woman offered a communion meditation that was essentially a homily. In many churches across our nation, this would not be unusual. But within the tradition of the Restoration movement and its three church families—Disciples of Christ, Independent Christian Churches, and Churches of Christ—it is unusual.

In the Restoration movement, the Disciples have led the way in opening the door to the participation of women in worship and from the pulpit. Through the history of the Stone-Campbell Movement, Disciples have consistently kept before us a notion that reaches back to the beginnings of the movement in this country, namely that women could participate in the public life of the church. Although the Disciples ordain women for Christian ministry, my Disciple sources tell me that senior minister positions remain largely dominated by males.

The Independent Christian Churches have a few women listed as ministers, a few congregations where women serve as elders, and a quiet history of effective work done by women planting and nourishing churches.

The a cappella Churches of Christ have only one woman preaching regularly and a pipeline in church-related colleges and universities of young women preparing for public work as ministers in the church. If recent history is a guide, most will move into other traditions as they find doors shut or will fill roles in children's ministry or positions as counselors on the staff of large churches. Not all will go quietly, however, and we need to be prepared to hear their voices. They have something important to tell us about how the gospel is to be shared in twenty-first century America. I would prefer to hear their voices in our pulpits.

Over a decade ago at Freed-Hardeman University, Lynn Mitchell and I suggested that it was time to begin a conversation about the role of women in the public life of our faith communities.¹ That conversation has gone on, and those who wish to still talk about the topic will find ample resources in and out of our corner of the Christian tradition. But I think this is not an issue that will be resolved by sweet reason or appeals

to Scripture. Those who wish to maintain the status quo can do so with appeals to both; those who wish to widen our understanding of what should take place within our congregations can do so as well by appealing to the same sources.

There is ample evidence in our Bibles that women played a greater role in the early church than many think. In the Roman world, the word and worth of women was limited, but we know women traveled with and supported Jesus. It was to the women of the Christian community that Christ made his first post-resurrection appearance. They



believed; the men did not. The prophecy fulfilled on Pentecost was that the sons and daughters of Israel would prophesy, and there is no indication in our sacred texts that the Spirit of God observed gender distinctions. Phoebe (Romans 16) and Priscilla (Acts 18, Romans 16) are models of feminine participation in the early church. Debate may continue on the nature of their roles, but what is clear is that they had significant public exposure that would be unusual in many of our more traditional communities of faith today.

Paul deals with matters related to women participating in worship in the Corinthian Church (1 Corinthians 11 and 14). For the sake of decorum and the respect of the community, Paul puts limits on the married women who were breaking community norms with their behavior. How the church appears when it finds itself in the public eye is important to Paul because it will affect how the gospel is received. The same is true today. How does the church appear when it finds itself under public scrutiny? A church dominated by men only will find itself a source of scandal.

Isn't it ironic that the tables have been turned? Paul acts because of what the public disorder does to the prospects for sharing the Gospel; today we will be better served when it is known that in the community formed by Christ, women are valued, heard, and respected. Pulpits filled by men, and worship services led solely by men give precisely the opposite message.

I believe what is needed is for the church to become a community drawing on the gifts of the people of God to do the work of God in the world. As a church, we are enriched when our public expressions draw on all of our resources as a community. We are lessened when, because of tradition, we choose the narrowest of interpretations to establish norms for what we can and cannot do in worship and from our pulpits. Bonnie Thurston in her very helpful book, *Women in the New Testament*, captures the nature of the challenge we are up against: "Part of the problem, I suspect, is that the subject of women in the New Testament touches on so many other basic and highly charged issues, notably language, power, economics and gender role expectations."² She goes on to liken her study to stepping into a minefield.

At Freed-Hardeman, I essentially set forth Thurston's thesis but noted as well that we in Churches of Christ have no tradition of talking about such topics without shattering our communities. Compromise is always hard when we are in conflict over issues of faith. Paul's admonition to become all things to all people is largely forgotten advice, and the notion that we might calibrate our practice to what will be accepted in the community sounds suspiciously shallow.

In the wider Restoration movement and in the more recent history of Churches of Christ, thoughtful students of Scripture have argued for greater roles for women.³ C.R. Nichol, long a resource to the most traditional strands of thought in Churches of Christ wrote in 1938 in *God's Woman*,

If a woman teaches a Sunday School class, at the solicitation of the elders in the church of Christ, she does not usurp authority over man. She does teach, is commanded to teach, but not 'over a man!' In her teaching the Sunday School class in the church of Christ she does so under the oversight of the elders of the church and in subjection to the elders of the congregation.⁴

Nichol did not believe that women should preach, but he clearly held that a woman could do what the church invited her to do when it came to teaching. It might be that if a church invited a woman to preach, the same truth would prevail. But the point remains: even in our most conservative circles there have been those who believed women were expected to teach and should be allowed to teach as their talents dictated. Like Paul, Nichol believed that you give your best to God because the work of preaching the gospel is what is important and that means doing what is necessary to ease the way.

In recent years, a spate of studies has come out revisiting the issue of inclusion.⁵ Richard Hughes, in *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, reminds us that in the early years of the Restoration movement women were evangelists.⁶ On the mission fields of Japan for 45 years, Sister Sarah Andrews (1893-1961) laid the founda-

tions for eight congregations and was known for her social work and “preaching the gospel.” Sister Andrews illustrates that ministry takes many forms, and those with a heart for ministry travel far to do their work.

The story of Sadie McCoy Crank (claimed by both Disciples and Independents) in the United States runs parallel to that of Sarah Andrews. When Crank died in 1948, the *Christian Standard* reported that she had “organized or reorganized 50 Christian Churches, led in the building of 18 houses of worship, baptized approximately 7,000 persons, and conducted 1,000 funerals.”⁷

Katie Hays, whose sermon is included in this issue of *Leaven*, stands in this tradition. Called to ministry, she has quietly done the work of a minister where God has placed her.

But there are those who find it hard to imagine a woman as a minister. A friend recently chided me by suggesting that, in his congregation, if women preached there would soon be no men left attending or working. He is a good minister with a commitment to the proclamation of the gospel, but he feels threatened.

If we had engaged in the same conversation with regard to race, he would have been embarrassed to say that allowing blacks public roles would soon drive whites from his church. Something else is going on in this conversation, and that something else speaks stronger than our desire to be a people called by and conformed to God’s word.

Gender is a minefield, but it need not be if we are willing to think theologically and turn again to scripture.

It is my judgment that the “something else” is that we have been conformed to a culture that is patriarchal and that gives men special privileges and roles. This is not uniquely our problem, but it is one we can recognize and do something about because the work we are called to do demands it of us. The Churches of Christ are essentially a “men only” club that keeps women on the outside, in part because we do not know any better, but more importantly because we are afraid. We are afraid to change a tradition that has given voice to women in secondary and manipulative ways. Stories abound of men who were dependent on their wives’ social and intellectual talents leading in the church behind the veil of male leadership. To challenge such a tradition treads on the toes of good people who have made this misguided system work—often to the good of the wider community. How could we think of changing?

Those who travel this road are also afraid of a God who struck down Nadab and Abihu because they offered strange fire. They have institutionalized the fear of making mistakes. They consciously choose to put front and center a God who punishes capriciously. They could speak of the God who is the waiting father who kills the fatted calf when the prodigal returns home, the God who is the forgiving husband to the apostate nation of Israel, the God who is captured in the notion of the highest good being love of the Divine and love of neighbor! We are known by our choices, and when out of our fear we choose to silence half or more of our churches, then either we have not taken our Bibles seriously, or we are protecting something that benefits us.

Or it may simply be that we are afraid—not only of God but also of one another. Men are afraid that they will not be truly masculine if they defer to women. The cult of the “macho” Jesus shares with the “blue-eyed Aryan Jesus” of myth and the “Black Power Jesus” of recent memory the extremes of moments in history that seem to demand a caricature. Behind this charade is a fundamental fear of women that makes many men tremble.

The presence of women in what have often been male-only roles makes some anxious—and for good reason—as they are being challenged by talents they are unprepared to match. Women are an unknown quantity for many men. The challenge for the Christian community is to lessen the mystery. Working together in the service of Christ offers the opportunity to ameliorate this lack of knowing.

Fear is also part of the feminine experience. Hannibal Lechter in the film *Silence of the Lambs* is an archetype for the malevolent male experienced by many women. Robert Mitchum as the preacher in *The*

Night of the Hunter filled the same role for an earlier generation. In a large and diverse church, for example, speak on Father's Day about the godly fathers you have known, and you will hear back a cacophony of response about fathers and brothers who were not righteous. To truly know one another demands that we move beyond these unacknowledged boundaries of the spirit.

I am reminded of a sermon illustration heard often when I was younger: the road to hell was wide, the path to heaven narrow. Offered a \$10 bill that might be counterfeit, one always chose the smaller bill known to be true. Rhetorically, these illustrations work; biblically, they are wanting. The road to heaven may be narrow, but it is clear in the parable of the talents (Matthew 25) that opting to simply protect the gifts we have been given is an unwise course of action. Are we prepared to claim on the day of judgment that we allowed godly women to be silenced because we were afraid and that this was appropriate stewardship of the gifts given the people of God?

Within the a cappella wing of the Restoration movement, the manner in which we have dealt with Gal 3: 28 gives insight into our difficulties bringing to reality change with regard to gender. This well-known passage does not indicate that the early church was an egalitarian Eden, but it does give us indication that the status quo is not necessarily the norm. "In Christ," we are told, "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female for all of you are one if in Christ Jesus."

Most of us have learned that relations between the races need to be smoothed out, but in truth, until lately in the United States, most of us have lived fairly insular lives surrounded by those like us. That the notion of diversity has become a political issue indicates that, for many, the biblical norm is not viewed positively.

For Americans, the issue of slave and free was settled by a painful and divisive war, but we in Churches of Christ have spent over a century sorting out the implications of slavery as it played out in the racial patterns of the American South. It came close to home in the 1960s and 1970s, and I would argue that the emergence of two Churches of Christ divided by race and theology is a living reminder that we have not gotten through this thicket nearly half a century after *Brown v. Board of Education*.⁸

Gender is a minefield, but it need not be if we are willing to think theologically and turn again to scripture. Paul in 1 Corinthians 12, in the middle of his conversation about discord in worship, lays out a vision of a church that draws on the gifts of all its membership. That the gifts of prophecy and ecstatic tongues are on his mind does not negate the importance of the church being called to use all of its gifts. Love trumps ecstatic gifts. Love does not replace the gifts of music, teaching, speaking, leading—and in our modern communities, these are the gifts we are most likely to confront.

Paul is explicit about how the church body functions, claiming,

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

Paul is talking about the life of the community, and that includes its public expressions of worship. He goes on to explain that love triumphs over the divisiveness of competing gifts, and he makes it clear that those who disrupt the worship or other public activities of the church are to be censured. "When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Let all things be done for the building up" (1 Cor 14:26). There are no gender distinctions here, but those who ask inappropriate questions are to be silent and ask their husbands at home.

Now let's be clear about where we are in this article. In a tradition that has talked of taking the Bible seriously and promoted common sense as the key to biblical understanding, I am suggesting that women be expected to use all of their gifts in the service of God just as men are expected to use their gifts in the service of God. I have noted biblical precedent; I have pointed to those within our ranks past and present who believe women's roles should be gift-based. I have suggested that within our tradition, not to mention within

the wider Christian tradition, there are ample resources for study on this topic that indicate our traditional interpretations are much too narrow, too restrictive, and contrary to the intent of Scripture and the will of God.

Within Churches of Christ we have always had some who acted with a more inclusive understanding—countering the norms of their times. These few have been unusual. When Churches of Christ have been called to go counter to the prevailing norms, we have had difficulty doing so. The inability of our churches to deal with racial segregation is instructive. Our willingness to change our views on pacifism after World War I is also worth noting.⁹ We have a hard time going against societal norms. Those in our churches who are “pro-life” and find it difficult to oppose the death penalty provide a case in point.

In our current conversation, those who support the status quo have suggested that the desire to see women preach signals a desire for political correctness. They argue that those who believe God intends his church to be an expression of his graciousness are simply hearing the siren call of feminism. A similar accusation was used two generations ago when integration was labeled a tool of the communist conspiracy. Arguing for the appropriateness of women preaching in our churches is not an effort to make real the pleadings of special interests; it is not a question of women having the right to preach. It is a question of taking seriously our responsibilities. We are all impoverished when women are silenced.

TWO FINAL OBSERVATIONS

First, in a movement feeling the need for renewal, I would prefer we went again to the sources of our faith—scripture and Christian practice. We are a people shaped by the Bible, but we are also a people shaped by the way we have always done things. We have not always done things the way we are doing them today. And the Bible does not tell us to do things the way we are doing them.

“What about 1 Tim 2:11-12?” someone is sure to ask. And someone else will ask about I Cor 11, where we have instructions for how women are to be dressed when praying or prophesying. Here again we have those choices. I am confident that by reading our texts through the eyes of Gal 3:28 we can unleash new purpose and renewed mission in our churches, but I understand the nature of the change I am proposing.

The gifts women bring to public worship are too numerous to mention; the talents they will bring to our pulpits are the same, but we will be doing something different for us, and that is disturbing to some and invigorating to others. Gamaliel’s advice to the men of Israel (Acts 5) might well be our motto.

Second, we have all watched with pain the travail of the Catholic Church and the issues of sexual abuse that have racked that community. These problems have come to light in part because of the size of the Roman Catholic community. Public scrutiny is less likely in smaller communities that are disconnected by the nature of their polity. But do not doubt that we have similar problems in Churches of Christ. We simply do not have reasonable ways to track such difficulties with ministers.

All who have been involved in ministry have a trove of tales about ministerial malpractice. In one week several years ago I heard truthful tales of three public figures in Churches of Christ involving sexual sins of the sort the Roman Church has been pilloried for allowing.

We can learn from the Catholic Church’s debacle and our church families will be healthier when the power imbalance between genders is recognized and addressed. Women need women in public roles who know about the issues of their lives. No matter how well trained, it is an invitation to disaster to suggest that the male elders of a church or the male minister of a church are the only sources of comfort, solace, and counsel to a woman suffering abuse, sorting out personal issues, or struggling with unbelief.

What is easily forgotten in all of this is that the gathered church is more than a community of words; it is a community with symbols. The table at the center of our shared experience reminds us of the Lord’s presence; the pulpit reminds of the importance of the word. Those who stand before us in these public acts send just as powerful a message.

We teach our children about what is important by our actions. Public roles for men alone convey a notion that men alone are valued in the church. You are what people see, and in church that is not good enough!

If women are to preach in Churches of Christ, how will it come about? It will happen when two factors align. First, when we who are the church decide that the work we are about is important enough to give it our best, we will be ready. When women preach, they will frame the gospel message in ways that are fresh and vital. We need that freshness because the message is too important not to be delivered as effectively as possible.

Not every woman called to preach will excel. Not every man called to preach excels. I am confident that when the practice of ministry ceases to be a boys club that the quality of our proclamation will improve, and we will all be better for it.

Second, women will preach in Churches of Christ when we decide not to be afraid. We live in a dangerous world, with many things to be fearful about, but I believe that our God has better things in mind for us than fear.

In doing the will of God, we will make mistakes. Holy history reminds us that God can deal with the mistakes of humankind. Let us not make the mistake of continuing to silence our mothers, sisters, and daughters.

Working together holds the promise of greater integrity within the church and offers women what they have always asked for, the opportunity to sacrifice, suffer, and serve using all of their God given gifts.¹⁰

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END NOTES

- 1 Ralph Gilmore, Don McWhorter, Lynn Mitchell, Robert Randolph, *Gender and Ministry: The Role of the Woman in the Work and Worship of the Church* (Huntsville, AL: Publishing Designs, Inc., 1990).
- 2 Bonnie Thurston, *Women in the New Testament* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 1.
- 3 See the comments of Lynn Mitchell in *Gender and Ministry* (pp. 38-45) for a sampling of differing views among our pioneers.
- 4 C.R. Nichol, *God's Woman* (Clifton, TX: Nichol Publishing Company, 1938), 154.
- 5 Carroll D. Osburn, ed., *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity* (2 vols, Joplin, MO: College Press, 1993, 1995); Carroll D. Osburn, *Women in the Church: Reclaiming the Ideal*, 2nd ed. (Abilene, TX., ACU Press, 2000); Thomas Robinson, *A Community Without Barriers Study Guide* (New York: Privately Published, 2002). The experiences of the Stamford, Connecticut, Church of Christ are recounted in Dale Pauls, *Sons and Daughters: Hearing Women's Voices at the Stamford Church of Christ* (Stamford, CT: Privately Published, 2002).
- 6 Richard Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 377-380.
- 7 Obituary in *The Christian Standard* (Nov 6, 1948).
- 8 For a painful description of the bitter nature of the conflict see Hughes, 270-306.
- 9 Hughes, 145-49.
- 10 Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, "Ordaining Women: Two Views," *First Things* (April 2003), 42.

